

A FRAMEWORK FOR LEARNING

The challenge of introducing ethical issues to students is one faced in schools on a daily basis. Here four IB teachers share their views on the best ways of bringing ethical thinking into the classroom



Edgar Eslava, principal at Colegio CIEDI, Bogotá, Colombia

Ethical journeys for an international education

One of the defining features of today's student population is geographical mobility. On the one hand, there are the opportunities offered by electronic communications: at any given moment, while you may be chatting about the new adventures of a film hero with a Malaysian or an Argentinian friend, your monitor may spring into life with breaking news of a just-happened natural disaster in the Alps, a scientific breakthrough in Antarctica, or a new sports record achieved in Sydney. On the other hand, the mobility is also physical: scholarships, tour packages and student exchanges can generate opportunities for travelling, either inside the borders of one's home country or between countries oceans apart.

To be well prepared every traveller must carry with them some things that could hardly fit in a backpack. The traveller must face the trip with an open mind, knowing that the places they are about to enter are, most probably, ones where the culture could be unfamiliar. Only an individual who is tolerant, humble and a risk taker would be able to enjoy a world defined by its diversity. A traveller must also know that, like it or not, every time you land on foreign soil you assume – in the eyes of both locals and fellow foreigners – the not

unchallenging role of cultural ambassador for a whole country. A calm, centred, self-confident and honest person would have a better chance of success than someone lacking those qualities. Finally, every traveller must be balanced and generous, acknowledging that no matter how firmly you believe you are right, there is always a lot to learn and plenty of people to learn from.

The challenge of an international education is to educate the best possible kind of travellers, even if their travels never take them beyond national or local borders. Such an outcome must be a reflection of the institutions where we help our kids to grow up: schools that educate in diversity by treating their students as individuals; schools that respect personal identity and that promote identification with national values; schools honest enough to identify their strengths and to learn from their mistakes. That is the reason why what defines an international school is neither a marketing strategy nor a postmodern academic fashion, but their commitment to the role of educators of citizens of the world.

“Only one who is tolerant, humble and a risk taker can enjoy a world defined by its diversity”



Joseph F Marino, PhD, principal at Xaverian High School, New York, USA

Before teaching ethics: a five-step agenda

The goal of teaching ethics is to promote a sense that to be fully human is to be a responsible member of a larger community. I submit the following as a viable preparatory approach for accomplishing this goal.

Step one: Teach the notion of perspective. Students need to understand the fact that 'point of view' is a given for each individual, but also that my perspective on the world is not an absolute measure. Each of us starts from a context of socially implanted ideas, including political, religious and family-laden values. Understanding these as my point of view and that they are not necessarily shared by others is fundamental to an understanding that questions of right and wrong extend beyond personal needs and interests.

Step two: Affirm the existence of core human values. In America's infancy, the founding fathers asserted this when they highlighted 'Life, Liberty and Happiness' as those rights which cannot be separated from the human condition at large. It's not argued that my life, liberty or happiness are irrevocable but that Life, Liberty, and Happiness themselves are sacrosanct. The self-evident nature of these values serves as a universal platform for a meaningful discussion of virtually all ethical questions.

“Community service projects should be an integral part of any attempt to teach ethics”

Step three: Cultivate a sense of empathy. We can refashion our personal perspective through empathy. Just as I wince when I see someone hurt, I should wince morally when I witness a violation of core human values.

Step four: Go beyond the teaching of tolerance. To be tolerant suggests putting up with something. While I may not share your perspective or circumstances, I am able to understand them; even be empathetic with them. I realize that your stance on an ethical question may be reasonable; that is, consistent with core human values, although different from my own. Accepting different points of view is an exercise in intellectual humility rather than an arrogant endurance of what I don't agree with.

Step five: Mandate service. Detached discussion on ethical theory is insufficient. Without executing good deeds – that is, behaviours that promote core human values – all discussion about ethics is lifeless. Community service projects, at the earliest possible age, should be an integral part of any serious attempt to teach ethics.



Sean Thomas, PYP teacher at the Early Childhood Education department of K International School, Tokyo, Japan

Ethics in action for the younger learner

What place do ethics have in education? If you work in an IB school, this question has largely been answered for you in the form of the Learner Profile, which can be seen as the platform from which ethics are taught within the framework of the PYP. However, putting this into action still poses one of our greatest challenges. As a teacher in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) department of a Tokyo international school, I can see the importance of making the Learner Profile matter from the start.

As I came to terms with all I needed to understand to work within the PYP framework, making the Learner Profile work in practice seemed unlikely. But as the whole team in my year level began to grapple with this challenge, we started to see ways around it. We tackled the easy terminology first: we do little else at this age if not take risks, so that came naturally enough. Then we were caring: this is a conversation any ECE teacher has with their students whether in an IB school or otherwise. However, when it came time to address what it means to be principled, we started getting stuck. There is really no picture, song or set of words available to the ECE teacher to make this attribute engaging to students.

To keep it interesting we had to get more creative.

“To keep the Learner Profile interesting to younger students we had to get more creative”

We came up with the idea of using pictures of our students and placing them up on our Learner Profile board under the heading of the attribute they had exemplified, explaining how they had done so. We were then promptly chastised by every student who felt they had acted similarly and not been recognized! We knew right then we were on to something.

When a colleague informed us how Takeshi (not his real name), who had difficulty expressing himself in English, told her how he was 'principled' and then explained why we all just about fell over. At that moment, I was wholeheartedly won over by the Learner Profile.

As a relatively new PYP practitioner, I would urge everyone teaching in the early years to rethink the use of the Learner Profile in their classrooms. Certainly we always do our best to serve students' needs, but the better an understanding students can achieve of this fundamental component from the beginning, the better it can serve them once they leave us.



Simon Murray, deputy head at St George's British International School, Rome, Italy

Questions as ethics in IBO programmes

The IBO's paper exploring the criteria for a continuum of international education makes a Socratic commitment to the understanding of values, ethical or otherwise: "Encouraging students to examine critically their own and others' customs and traditions is a necessary element for an education that enables them to discern what is of value and what ought to be cherished and retained." [IBO 2002]

Quite how inquiry per se leads us to discern such thoughts remains unclear, but it is still possible to argue that it is an inquiry-based education that has the best chance of also being an ethical education. It establishes a structural relationship between learners and their world that has the capacity to allow ethical development that is much more flexible and wide ranging than an education driven by a perceived moral content alone.

A minimal set of attitudes emerge: knowledge of oneself or the other are products of inquiry and are worthy of inquiry; prior to inquiry, the self and other are undecided in terms of value, but can be compared; when developed in a group situation, communities of learning are capable of inquiring on the same basis. At the very least, such an approach seems capable of stimulating autonomy, empathy and solidarity as inquirers.

I would like to suggest that the statements that appear at the vertices of the PYP hexagon when turned into questions provide a very useful set of conditions for such an ethical education. Who are we? Where are we in place and time? How do we express ourselves? How does the world work? How do we organize ourselves? How do we share the planet? This list is not exhaustive, but the questions invite others that lead us further into the principal area with which ethics concerns itself: intersubjective plurality, the 'we' they all recognize.

It is difficult to imagine an education that claimed to be ethical that could not address these questions, regardless of the inflections in how they may be answered. Across the IB programmes, it sometimes feels that such philosophical questioning can wither away into discipline-based preoccupation, TOK being the most visible exception. Could all the IB curriculum models retain these questions at their vertices if only to function as reminders that they can all provide the conditions for an ethical education?

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